

Winter 2004

Sunset on Kalemegdan: Belgrade, Serbia, October 2000 (poem)

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SUNSET ON KALEMEGDAN
BELGRADE, SERBIA, OCTOBER 2000

John Gery

We finally walked up to the monument
after seven days of madness –
of conversations, conflicts, coffees, contracts
resolved, at last, among the advocates
for change – to taste the sadness

of Kalemegdan Park above the fog,
an autumn fog before the freeze
really set in. New Belgrade to the west
lay stained in white, thick as the hotel drapes
each morning you would ease

back from the window in our room when steam
behind it from the radiator
sizzled for an hour. But you couldn't sweep
this haze away. Instead, we turned and gazed
across the Sava, toward the faded tower

of the television building, charred, splintered,
like script in Arabic,
its twisted steel antennae etched in black
spelling out the story of the "smart bombs"
that had seared its roof. You picked

out, through the dense cold, Hotel Yugoslavia,
its long low garden block that lines

the Danube to its north. "Bombed, too" you told me,
"not open yet, though it's been eighteen months,"
then spoke of other signs

of desecration, disrepair and damage:
graffiti on the busts
of old war heroes I then photographed
with you between them in your stylish hat—
a blue bloom in a bed of rust!—

the scattered bricks and litter on the fortress,
and not far off, unseen,
the embassy where four more people had died,
victims not only of the beams that crushed them
but of the last regime

that had survived so long by vaunting the dead,
a sacred Serbian tradition
as cherished as the fields of Kosovo.
The crowd around us didn't seem to mind, though,
so we began to listen

to them, the strolling couples chatting, girls
in leather coats, their necks
and legs exposed despite the brisk air, boys
taunting the girls with mournful grins, one woman
browsing an article on sex

while she rocked her baby, two men at chess
surrounded by an aging team
of experts dressed in tattered sweaters, leaves
drifting among them, even as they waited
for the next move. Tossed in this dream

we stopped our talk and looked back at the sun,
a fireball in the mist
blotting the fog that settled over Belgrade

like a splotch of blood absorbed in cotton.

It oozed bright pink at first,

then disappeared, as lost as we were in it

before the onslaught of the dark.

At peace, and still in love, we poked our way

among the few small groups lingering still,

loathe to exit the park

for Knez Mihailova, for Hotel Moscow,

our last glimpse of this city,

not ancient, not yet new, suspended here

between two rivers and the fog, that somehow

has lived through the scorn and pity,

the pressed palms of a tyrant and the soft

caresses of a treacherous friend,

rusting, sizzling, even as it gives way

to the likes of you, a blue burst in bloom,

a light in shadow at day's end.